

## Inside Story



## Poet turns the ordinary into something new

Even though she's nearly 87, multiple-award winner Margaret Avison continues to write poetry and touch hearts.

Margaret was born in Galt (now Cambridge), Ontario, in 1918. Her father, a Methodist minister, was called to Regina, Calgary and then Toronto. Whether homesick for the Prairies, struggling with adolescent angst, or affected by the Great Depression, Margaret found her early teens very difficult. Poetry helped.

The poetry was always there. Her first published piece, "The God of the Storm," about the way thunder sounded like the church organ, was published in The Calgary Herald when she was seven years old. Her mother had submitted it.

Margaret grew up surrounded by talk of the Bible and church. In Margaret Avison and Her Works, David Kent quotes her as saying, "I was taught to read the Bible, to pray, to love, to enjoy." In Grade 8 she decided the Bible was a "lovely story" she could no longer believe.

But the poetry continued. In Grade 9, Margaret's teacher at Humber College, Gladys Story, oversaw a poetry club. Here Margaret received excellent advice on both style and direction. One day Story wrote, "For the next 10 years do not use the first person in any poem you write." That advice resulted in a subtle change that made Margaret's work more objective.

Margaret went to Victoria College, University of Toronto, where her teachers included one of Canada's greatest poets, E.J. Pratt, and renowned literary critic Northrop Frye.

She worked at a variety of jobs, writing when she could. According to Heather Pycrc in "A Digital History of Canadian Poetry," Margaret worked as a librarian, secretary, research assistant and file clerk, in insurance, for Gage Publishers and as a lecturer at University of Toronto. She taught servicemen, wrote book reviews and was nursemaid to a family, a job that included a long trip through France.

At last, she received a Guggenheim Fellowship, a prestigious award that gave her the time and finances to write. Her first book, *Winter Sun*, was published in 1960 and won the Governor General's award.

During that time, while working as a research assistant to a professor of English at the University of Toronto, a student asked her, "Do you know the joy of the Lord Jesus?" Margaret showed no interest. Her understanding of God had never included Jesus.

The student advised her to attend a certain evangelical church, and for two years, the words haunted her. Finally, she ventured into that church. Another two years passed. Then, on January 3, 1963, she read John 14:1, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God; believe also in me." She recalls that she sensed an unmistakable presence in her room and knew it



was Jesus. But she held back, afraid He would ask her to give up her poetry. Finally, she threw her Bible across the room and said, "Take it all, the poetry too."

The next day she wrote a poem about the parable of the seeds. "It just flowed out of me. He didn't take the poetry away, but I had to offer it."

Afterwards, she felt she ought to "witness" through her poetry, but she soon realized those poems weren't very good. She realized she couldn't write for the sake of propagandizing. Instead, her desire to reach out led her to work in a Presbyterian outreach ministry, first as a volunteer and then as an employee.

What is the secret of Margaret's poetry? Learning from many great poets, including Christians such as John Donne and George Herbert, she is able to take ordinary events or images and help the reader see them in completely new ways. Her work has been recognized many times—she won two Governor General's awards (1960 and 1989), the Griffin Canadian Poetry Prize (2003), was made an officer in the Order of Canada (1985) and is the holder of three honorary doctorates and numerous other recognitions.

Echoing back to what Gladys Story told her years ago, Margaret says when you are young, poetry is something you write for yourself. But as you grow older, you learn to reach beyond yourself.

"A poem needs to be received to be complete. So yes, I write for listeners out there somewhere (believers or not)—not to give to, teach or encourage them, but to acknowledge together something that has touched off a poem."

Margaret's poetry is available as a series titled *Always Now: The Collected Poems*, (three volumes), published by The Porcupine's Quill. These books contain much of Avison's poetry up to 2002.  
([www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/avison](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/canpoetry/avison))

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